BIOG.
/BEL

MEMOIR

OF

JOHN BELL.

[*From the* PHARMACEUTICAL JOURNAL, *Vol. VIII., No. XII.*]

[Reprinted—1872.]

BELL, John [1774 – 1849]

22200085696

MEMOIR OF JOHN BELL.

JOHN BELL was the second son of Jacob Bell, who was a mastmaker, in partnership with his brother-in-law, James Sheppard, at Wapping Wall. Prior to the American war, their business flourished, but when the war commenced, they became uneasy at furnishing materials for a purpose so much at variance with their principles as members of the Society of Friends. Jacob Bell withdrew from the concern, and became a hosier, in which business he was less successful.

John Bell, the second son, was born on Fish Street Hill, on the 4th of December, 1774, and received his early education under Thomas Coar, who was a good classical scholar, and kept a school at Tottenham. On leaving school, he was apprenticed to Frederick Smith, of 29, Haymarket, Chemist, as a preliminary step to his education as a Physician, for which profession his father intended him. During his apprenticeship, he attended the lectures of Dr. Pearson on Chemistry, Materia Medica, and the practice of Physic, and subsequently Dr. Hooper's lectures, which were delivered in Blenheim Street, on the premises of Joshua Brookes, the Surgeon. He was diligent in attending the lectures, some of which were delivered at seven o'clock in the morning, and in other respects exerted himself in gaining information, although his opportunities were very limited. During his apprenticeship, his allowance of pocket-money was only one shilling a week, and this he expended chiefly in books and chemical apparatus, of course on a very small scale.

He soon abandoned the idea of following the medical profession, for which he considered himself not fitted on account of his natural diffidence and nervous temperament. On his first attempt at bleeding a patient, his hand trembled, and he was so nervous that he with difficulty accomplished it, and did not attempt the operation a second time. He also objected to the medical profession on the ground that it would (to use his own expression) "expose him too much to the temptations of the world," during his probation as a medical student, as well as in the ordinary requirements of medical practice. The reduced circumstances of his father afforded an additional argument in favour of another avocation less expensive in its commencement.

He therefore decided upon commencing business in a small way as a Chemist and Druggist, and after the expiration of his apprenticeship, he continued for some months to serve as an assistant, while looking out for an opening, the accommodation being considered an equivalent for his services. He afterwards received a small salary.

WELLCOME LIBRARY INSTITUTE

The fragment of a journal which he kept in the year 1797, is characteristic of the peculiar constitution of his mind, which was very unlike that of most young men of his age. His chief desire appeared to be to escape "the snares and temptations of the world," and to adhere strictly to the path of duty. He was conscious of a natural irritability of temper, which it was his constant endeavour to subdue, although he frequently alludes to the extreme difficulty in attaining his object, and his occasional despondency and contrition, almost amounted to a state of religious melancholy. One incident will serve to show the extent of these conscientious feelings:—Finding money unaccounted for in the till, he entered the amount as for goods sold in making up his account to make it balance, instead of acknowledging his forgetfulness. On reflection, this occasioned so much "distress and trouble," that it was several days before he could perform his duties calmly and with any degree of satisfaction, so great was his uneasiness at the idea of the occurrence of a mistake in the money.

On the 17th of August, he observed a shop to let in Oxford Street, to which he alludes as follows:—

"Observed, on my return home from seeing a poor woman, a shop to let, which seems a little to strike me, though with a fear lest I should err in judgment. It would truly be considered a peculiar favour to be rightly directed so as to have peace and confidence afterwards, as with a superior licence in a matter of so great importance in knowing the right place. This must all be left, as I have never wanted yet, and if I may be so favoured as to keep my place, however unworthy, will not an allwise bountiful Providence care for me? How is it with the sparrows and the lilies? though truly can I have so great a right as they? since they have never sinned like me."

On several other occasions he alludes to his doubts and misgivings respecting "that shop in Oxford Street," which he seemed unable to abandon, and yet had not resolution or confidence to come to a decision. One ground of hesitation, arose from delicacy of feeling towards his master, to whom he was desirous of acting with strict honour and avoiding the possibility of any jealousy or distrust, by commencing business too near the old shop. His employer, however, not only gave him full permission, but encouraged him to proceed; and his father ultimately settled the question by taking the shop for him, and lent him £400 to prepare and stock it. The fitting-up order for drugs was executed by Messrs. Fynmore and Palmer, on the 24th of November, 1798, and amounted to £86 13*s*. 9½*d*.

There was at that time only one Chemist's shop in Oxford Street, which was situated at the west corner of Argyll Street, now the Green Man and Still. This establishment was celebrated for the fabrication of cheap powders, which were ground and prepared in a mill at the top of the house, and the character of the business in other respects was not of a high order. The custom of adulterating medicines was so prevalent that even at houses considered above the

average in respectability, various practices were carried on, which occasioned much uneasiness to the subject of this memoir. He has frequently been heard to mention the fact that during his apprenticeship, he was employed to pound many hundred-weights of glauber salts, which were sold as nitre for horses. Red precipitate was mixed with red lead, and there was a small room almost exclusively used for "russifying" rhubarb. This process consisted in cutting and filing East Indian, to imitate Turkey rhubarb. In reference to horse powders, it was customary to keep two kinds, the "genuine" and the "compound," which latter were prepared by sending 14lbs. of the article to the mill and receiving in return 28lbs., sometimes even a larger quantity, no questions being asked as to the mode in which the quantity had been increased. These and other similar practices being too general to excite any attention, they were not entirely absent even in the establishment of a man who was in other respects remarkably conscientious and scrupulous, which the following fact will serve to show:—Before embarking in business as a Chemist, Frederick Smith held for many years a lucrative situation in the Post Office. His salary had been gradually raised until it amounted to nearly £1000 a year, and was likely to be further advanced. It happened, however, that he was sometimes called upon to give evidence in cases of robbery, which was at that time a capital offence. Becoming impressed with a religious scruple against taking an oath, and also against capital punishments, this duty was a source of great uneasiness, which increased to such a degree, that he at length declined to comply when called upon to give evidence. By this means he lost his situation in the year 1783, and finding the business for sale in the Haymarket, he became a Chemist and Druggist. Not having been educated to the business, he carried it on for some time in the same manner in which it had been conducted by his predecessor. When he became more acquainted with the business, he gradually discontinued these practices, and was afterwards very particular in the quality of his drugs. The circumstance serves to illustrate the impropriety of persons embarking in a business of that kind, without understanding the fundamental principles on which it should be conducted. John Bell, having during his apprenticeship seriously considered this subject, resolved that, as soon as he became a free agent in the management of a business, he would adopt a different principle, selling the best medicines he could procure. In this experiment he occasionally had some misgivings from doubts arising whether it would be possible to carry out to the full extent what he considered to be the principles of strict honesty. He was, however, encouraged by his younger brother, Jacob Bell, who assisted him at the commencement, and, who maintained without flinching that it was not only possible, but expedient as a matter of policy, to defy competition in price, and make the quality of the medicines the primary consideration.

Towards the end of 1798, John Bell opened his shop. On the first day his receipts amounted to ten shillings, and he lost half-a-guinea by the following accident:—A customer who came in for some trifling article, wanted change for half-a-guinea. This was rather a large sum to raise so soon after opening the shop, and Mr. Bell had occasion to search his pockets, as well as a drawer in the counting-house, in order to find the amount. The customer observing the difficulty, said it was of no consequence as he had some change. Just at this moment the amount of change was collected and laid on the counter, on which he said, that as it was there he would take it. But he had already put the half-guinea in his pocket, and taking up the change he went off with both, the young Chemist being so bewildered that he was not aware of the fact until several minutes afterwards. This mishap discouraged him so much that he despaired of success altogether, considering it a proof of his incapacity to "cope with the world," or manage a business on his own account.

So complete was his despondency at the supposed hopelessness of his case that he did not think it worth while to light the lamps in the evening. A neighbour who had taken a kind interest in his proceedings, observing the shop dark, came in to inquire the reason. and on being informed, used all his endeavours to dispel these gloomy ideas, declared that he would light the lamps himself rather than allow his friend to be overcome by such a trifle. This was all to no purpose, and in the morning the young Chemist went to his uncle Sheppard, who had acted like a second father to him on previous occasions,. and informed him of the determination at which he had arrived to dispose of the shop as it stood, before he had made his position still worse by becoming involved in debt. He mentioned as an additional source of discouragement that he had been so cramped for want of capital that he had not been able to complete the arrangements of the shop to his satisfaction, and that it would cost at least £100 to remove a partition, and add what was requisite for the convenience of business. He thought, as the situation was good, that a purchaser might be found having the capital required, who would take the concern off his hands, and thus enable him to pay 20s. in the pound, and said he would rather continue in the capacity of an assistant all his life than continue in business at the risk of his creditors, with the prospect which stared him in the face of becoming a defaulter.

His uncle, as he had previously done, encouraged him by all means to proceed—endeavoured to convince him that the evils which he apprehended were imaginary—assured him that he had a good prospect of success if he would only persevere, and insisted on his taking a loan of £100 to defray the expense of the desired additions to his shop. By these substantial and irresistible arguments, he was induced to give the business another trial, and his uncle from

time to time called upon him, giving him that encouragement of which he seemed so much in need. He observed the most rigid economy in his manner of living, let the house to lodgers except the attics, which he retained as bedrooms, and the back kitchen, where he took his meals. Throughout the winter he did not treat himself to a fire in the counting-house, except on the coldest days, and then only in the evening.

His returns, in the first instance, were extremely small, sometimes not more than three or four shillings a day; but he was assiduous in his attention to business, being constantly behind the counter, and his brother although young, soon became a valuable auxiliary. He did not profess to be an operative or analytical Chemist, but confined his attention to the retail and dispensing business, and adopted certain fixed principles to which he rigidly adhered, as being at the same time in accordance with his conscientious feelings, and calculated to gain the confidence of the public.

At the end of the first year he made a careful investigation of his accounts, in which he was assisted by his uncle Sheppard, and found that he had lost money, being in a worse position than he was at the commencement. It became a serious question whether it was prudent to continue the business, but having calculated that his loss during the year scarcely exceeded the amount of his house-keeping expenses, and being encouraged by his friends to proceed, he followed this advice.

During the second year the business improved considerably, and soon afterwards he was enabled to pay off the capital which he had borrowed from his father and uncle. In the winter of 1800 he took Thomas Zachary as an apprentice, who subsequently became one of his partners.

In the year 1802, John Bell married the eldest daughter of Frederick Smith, his late master. He continued for some years to devote unremitted personal attention to his business, which increased beyond his expectations. He never solicited business, or courted the patronage of the profession, and was not ambitious of extending his connection among the higher circles of society. To the poor he was always attentive, and it was a favourite remark with him that he often had "twelve customers for a shilling." Without any attempt on his part to encourage counter practice, he was frequently applied to by the poor for advice in trifling cases, and much against his inclination, he acquired some little repute as a doctor among that class of customers. This, however, was rather in the way of charity than regular business, as he had a great dislike to the responsibility of giving advice. There was at that time no law to prevent his practising as an apothecary, the Act of 1815 not having been passed until several years afterwards. But he never asserted his right to the privilege of an "Apothecary before the Act," as he disclaimed any pretentions to medical qualification, having from choice, adopted the business

of a Chemist, and devoting his chief attention to the prescription department. His brother Jacob, who came originally as an apprentice, rather expected to have been taken into partnership, but in this he was disappointed, and accordingly contemplated establishing himself in business, in some other part of London. Before putting his intention into practice he was taken ill, and died of consumption, in October, 1805.

Thomas Zachary's apprenticeship ended in 1806. By that time the number of hands employed was two shopmen and three apprentices. It was soon afterwards requisite to sacrifice the private door in order to enlarge the shop.

Although diligent and regular in his attention to business, John Bell did not allow this to interfere with his religious duties. He always kept the shop entirely closed on Sundays, one assistant being on duty in the morning and two during the remainder of the day to attend to such business as came in, which was sometimes as much as that number could accomplish. He also kept the shop closed on Thursday morning until past twelve o'clock, in order to allow the young men (except those on duty) to attend meeting. The assistants at the time to which we allude were, like their master, Members of the Society of Friends, and the above custom was instituted under a sense of duty. It was, however, attended with much inconvenience and mortification, as it gave rise to a constant report that Mr. Bell was dead, and the young men left in charge on those occasions had enough to do to answer inquiries on this subject. The practice was, however, continued for many years, until the active management came into other hands.

In the domestic regulations of the establishment he was remarkably strict, prohibited the assistants from going out in the evening under any pretence without express permission, and would not allow any deviation from the rules and regulations which were drawn up in writing. Notwithstanding this adherence to discipline, he was generally on the best terms with his assistants while in his employment, as well as afterwards. In taking apprentices, he was never tempted by a high premium, and, in fact, rather preferred those who had nothing to pay, under the idea that he was rendering them the greater service, and that they would be more likely to prove docile and tractable. In this he was sometimes disappointed. One young man whom he had taken under these circumstances, was refractory, and when he was out of his time, he started an opposition shop in the same street. The front was in imitation of that of his late master—"John Bell" over the door, with a small "from"—"house Bell," on one door-post, and "shop Bell" on the other. The imitation was so good, that Mrs. Sheppard, the wife of the kind uncle, who came one evening to tea, having directed the coachman to drive to John Bell's, was taken to the wrong shop, and discovered her mistake when on the staircase from the young man inquiring where she was going, and what was her business. She replied that she had come to her nephew, John Bell's, to tea, on which he exclaimed—"This is *from* John Bell's, the other shop is a few doors higher up."

In the year 1819, John Bell found it requisite to obtain some relief from the confinement of business, much of his time being required for other engagements, in which he felt it to be his duty to occupy himself. Accordingly, he took into partnership Thomas Zachary and John H. Walduck. who had previously been his apprentices.

From this time. the senior partner gradually relaxed in his business exertions, and devoted much of his time to benevolent, and charitable objects, especially in connection with the Society of Friends.

John Bell was always disposed to unite with his brethren in any movement which circumstances rendered necessary for the benefit of the trade, as, for instance, in reference to the Stamp and Excise Acts, or any threatened legislative measures of an obnoxious character; but he never took a prominent part, and from his natural diffidence, was not active in public business. When the Pharmaceutical Society was proposed, he approved of its objects, but was not sanguine as to the result, his past experience having led to a belief that the Chemists were not likely to "pull together," for any length of time. He took a lively interest in the proceedings of the Society, attended several of the early meetings, and was agreeably surprised at the continued prosperity of the Institution.

In the year 1839, he had the misfortune to lose his wife, and this calamity occasioned a shock from which he never entirely recovered.

About this period, his attention was directed to the subject of intemperance, and its lamentable effects on the lower classes. Being in the habit of distributing tracts to the poor in favor of total abstinence, he considered it his duty to try the experiment himself, by way of example. He had always been remarkable for temperate habits, although accustomed to take beer or wine in moderation, and in adopting the principle of abstinence he took no pledge, but simply tried the experiment, in which he persevered for about seven years. During this time his health was not uniformly good. He occasionally suffered from languor and a sluggish circulation, and he was advised to try the effect of a more stimulating regimen. For some time he was unwilling to deviate from his abstinent resolve, but Dr. Wilson, who seconded Dr. Hodgkin in this advice, suggested a plan which overcame the scruple. The wine was put up in two ounce bottles, and sent from the shop as a medicine. Finding the effect beneficial, he afterwards submitted, under medical orders, to take a glass of wine in the usual way. During the last year of his life, the infirmities of age gradually increased, he nearly lost his sight, his strength failed, and he complained of want of circulation, especially in the lower extremities.

On the 10th of December, a sore place was observed in one foot, which terminated in mortification in the course of a month. During this period he was confined to his room, and was fully aware of the serious nature of his disorder. Yet he was patient and cheerful, appeared to feel no regret on leaving this world, nor any dread at the approach of death. He expressed much thankfulness for all the mercies he had

received during his life, and full confidence that he should be equally favoured to the end. He retained the possession of his mental faculties to the last, and in taking leave of his family his only anxiety appeared to be on their account: with regard to himself he was calm and resigned, and his constitutional nervous timidity, which had been his constant companion through life, forsook him at the hour of death.

He died at his residence at Wandsworth, on the 14th of January, 1849, in his 75th year.

The above notice was undertaken at the suggestion of several Members of the Pharmaceutical Society, who considered an account of the early life of a Chemist, who had been above half a century in the business, might be interesting as well as useful, being, in the present instance, an illustration of the result of a strict adherence to conscientious principle, even under apparently unfavourable circumstances. The great difficulties he had to contend with in the commencement, which were increased by his natural caution and want of confidence in himself, may serve as an encouragement to young men under similar circumstances.

W. Brettell, Printer, 336a, Oxford Street.

REGULATIONS.

(*Written by John Bell, 338, Oxford Street, about* 1810.)

Sundries to be done every morning before breakfast.

To clear and wipe down all the counters. To dust the bottles in the windows. To see the serving bottles are clean, and when empty to fill them. To see that all the mortars are washed, the knives counted and wiped, and the lamps trimmed and glasses cleaned. That at least one assistant, besides the two junior apprentices, should attend in the shop, to be employed as above, and if not sufficient to accomplish it so as to be cleaned by breakfast time, to call the next in turn to assist in serving customers.

The three or four seniors, according to circumstances, to take it by turn to attend on First days, and to be assisted by a junior, in turn, through the year. Also to take it by turns to serve at meals and after nine in the evening, when business taken in previous thereto is finished, and when more than two are necessary, to call the next in turn to assist. *All* to assist in cleaning one shop window and bottles, &c., every third day morning and every sixth day morning, in the more general cleaning of the shop.

Each, as much as may be, to put everything he uses in its place after him, both store bottles and boxes, and serving bottles; to wipe the scales out after using and put them in their places, and if the lads are out, or otherways unavoidable, to wash their own mortars; and when no Customers are present, as much as possible, to prepare for them, by seeing there is a supply of the articles usually kept ready, preparing the sundry pills, picking gums, &c., and, as much as possible, to avoid disappointing of customers and to be particularly careful not to allow them to wait without being spoke to.

To rise at seven and go to bed at eleven, and all to be cleaned by breakfast time, so as to have nothing to hinder going to business immediately afterwards. Those who do not attend shop are at liberty to go out on fourth and seventh day, mornings, taking care to be at home by breakfast time. That the junior apprentice but two have the occasional superintendence of the elaboratory, but not so as to interfere with his being in the shop if necessary, that he examine all goods that come in with bills of parcels, keep the vial drawers in proper order before breakfast, sees that there is a supply of plaster leathers cut, &c., &c., also write any bills out that may be wanted.

The junior apprentice but one to execute apothecaries orders, to prepare all infusions and decoctions, and to keep the ingredients ready so as generally to set them on by breakfast time, to prepare any horse medicine not too large to be made in the shop, to have the general care of the apothecary books and to keep the counting house clear, to distribute and collect the monthly bills.

The apprentice to clear one counter as soon as customers will allow after dinner and tea.

None to go out without leave, and when out to return before eleven on week days, and if practicable half-past ten on first days.

To introduce no improper books, to read none at dinner time nor at tea time to the hindrance of business or when very busy.

All medicines to be directed consistently as going from a shop belonging to a friend, and none to be sent out without labelling.

All bills received to be credited in the day book.

To be careful to leave no money about the shop, and to be economical in everything without meanness.

The junior apprentice to prepare no prescriptions unless by the direction and superintendence of the senior assistant, to keep the sundry articles usually kept put up, and if behind hand to be assisted by his next senior. Lastly, to remember it is as much in the power and duty of the employed as the employer, to study to make each other happy, and to strive to do as we would be done by

JOHN BELL.